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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000147

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: President-PM joint committee meets after month's hiatus; Some progress, but no breakthrough yet

Refs: Colombo 127, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: After a month's hiatus, the joint committee formed by the President and the Prime Minister recommenced meetings on January 23. Contacts report that the meeting did not result in a breakthrough on control of the Defense Ministry, the key issue dividing the two sides. Contacts agreed, however, that progress had been made on other matters, including setting a date for Provincial Council elections and possible changes in the electoral system. In related news, the President gave a TV interview on January 23 in which she downplayed cohabitation tensions. The fact that the joint committee is meeting again is a potentially positive sign that there may be a way out of the cohabitation impasse yet. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) JOINT COMMITTEE MEETS AGAIN: On January 23, the joint committee formed in November 2003 by President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe to examine ways to resolve cohabitation tensions met. The January 23 meeting was the first meeting of the committee since mid-December, when it put on hold its regular schedule of meetings due to the holiday season. At the January 23 meeting, the President was represented by Mano Tittawella, a senior advisor, and W.J.S. Karunaratne, the President's Secretary. The PM was represented by Malik Samarawickrama, who is chairman of the United National Party (UNP), and Bradman Weerakoon, the PM's Secretary. The committee is slated to meet again late January 26.

3. (C) NO BREAKTHROUGHS: Contacts report that the committee's January 23 discussions did not result in a breakthrough on control of the Defense Ministry, the core issue dividing the two sides. Malik Samarawickrama told us that he had briefly raised the topic in the meeting, arguing that the President should return control of the ministry to the PM so that he could move forward with the peace process. Tittawella did not budge from the President's stance that she would hold on the Defense portfolio, although she was willing to discuss ways to involve the PM in defense decision-making regarding the peace process. (Note: Minister Milinda Moragoda had told the Ambassador January 21 that the PM had directed Samarawickrama to go easy on the defense matter and let the meeting focus on other issues.) Confirming the basic thread of Samarawickrama's remarks, Harim Peiris, a presidential assistant on press matters and the head of the TV channel, Rupavahini, told polchief that Defense issues had been discussed, but there had been no agreement on how to proceed on the matter.

4. (C) SOME PROGRESS ON OTHER ISSUES: Although there was no progress on defense issues, both Samarawickrama and Peiris agreed that some progress had been made in the following areas:

-- Date for Provincial Council (PC) elections: The two sides made progress in agreeing to a date to hold the PC elections that are due to take place in the first half of 2004. April 28th was discussed as a likely date, but was not finally agreed to. Discussions will continue on this subject.

-- Possible Electoral Reforms: The two sides discussed possible parliamentary electoral reforms that would move Sri Lanka away from a mainly proportional representation ("PR") system toward a mixed "PR" and "first-pass-the-post" system. Agreement was not reached in this area, but the two sides agreed to continue consultations on the issue. (Note: The idea of moving away somewhat from the "PR" system has been bruited about for years in Sri Lanka. The "PR" system was implemented in 1978, and many Sri Lankans believe that it helped create a fragmented political system that strengthens fringe parties in Parliament. At the same time, Sri Lankans

are reluctant to go back to the pre-1978 "first-past-the-post" system, which led to huge majorities in Parliament for the winner of the popular vote. The idea now is to mix the two systems, perhaps per the German model.)

-- Bribery and Corruption Commission: The two sides also discussed naming a new head for this commission, which has been leaderless for some months now.

15. (U) PRESIDENT DOWNPLAYS TENSIONS: In other cohabitation-related developments, President Kumaratunga downplayed the sense of "crisis" in Sri Lanka over the ongoing cohabitation impasse in an interview televised late January 23 on state-run television. Responding to a question by her spokesman, Harim Peiris (who is also chairman of the state-run Rupavahini television network, which the interview aired on), Kumaratunga said there was no crisis in the country, stating: "What crisis, where? What is this crisis?" In addition, when queried about the recent alliance between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Kumaratunga dismissed allegations that it was anti-peace process in intent. She stated: "We do not in any way encourage an armed conflict or war, and the JVP has also accepted the SLFP's and People's Alliance's consistent and never changing stand for the last twelve years which is that we are against war and we are for a negotiated settlement." Turning to the ceasefire agreement, Kumaratunga noted that since she took over the Ministry of Defense in November, there had been no change to the agreement and the ceasefire remained intact.

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COMMENT  
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16. (C) The fact that the joint committee is meeting again is a potentially positive sign that there may be a way out of the cohabitation impasse yet. (Note: The committee's meetings have been delayed for some time. Some attribute this to political disagreement between the President and PM on whether their team should meet at all. There were also reports that Mano Tittawella was unwell and needed time to recover from a fever.) Cohabitation has endured many body blows in past weeks, including the President's recent public announcement that she believes that she is entitled to another year in office and the controversial SLFP-JVP alliance, which is anti-UNP in intent. Given that the two sides are back meeting again, however, it appears there is a solid chance that they can overcome their disagreements and work together in the national interest. That said, it will take a lot of effort and the willingness of both sides to make things happen. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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